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ABSTRACT

That the book will always be with us is merely a statement of fact. Its physical form may change, what with technological advancement, but its essence will always be with us. That essence, described as the physical result of a mind or minds attempting with varying degrees of success to make contact with and inform other minds, will remain constant in every future age. This is, after all, one of the cardinal purposes of education, towards which every book, however made or used, is always employed. For this reason, it is imperative that every effort should be made to expand and develop libraries and take them to the people. (Author/GO)

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The Prospect for the "Book" as an Educational Medium

by Frank G. Jennings*

It is no prophecy to say that the book will always be with us. It is simply a statement of low-grade physical fact, useful but trivial.

The book is not to be defended, but used. Its major technological virtue is its simplicity of construction and except in its gargantuan form, such as elephant folio, it is highly portable. It is important to make the distinction suggested by Albert Szent-Gyorgyi between books that hold information and books that use information; that is, between books that are repositories and books that are expositories. The former are used to relieve the mind from self-clutter, the latter to aid the mind in reaching beyond a current condition. The difference can also be expressed as between the position of the artisan and the artist. It is this distinction, however, which causes a great deal of trouble, and the book is hoarded and cherished as a treasure.

It is easy to learn to read. It is a low-grade skill that can be taught to all but the most severely brain-damaged. But to use reading too soon and to depend upon it too heavily in the processes of education is to blunt a good tool by inexpert use. Fifty years ago Alfred North Whitehead warned, "A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth." Teachers and librarians know this truth in their marrow, and if they are uneasy before technology's open-handed advance, it is because they will not allow information to be mistaken for wisdom.

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It is this impulse that impelled Gordon N. Ray, in his American Library Association address in New York in July, 1965 (as reported in PUBLISHERS WEEKLY , July 18th, 1965) to assert that the profession would be ill-advised to turn from the education of librarians to the manufacture of information retrievers and the training of servitors in "systems analysis." He complained about the long observed "lack of fellow feeling between librarians and faculty members, who ought to be united ..." (as he said) "in the common world of learning." Mr. Ray told his audience in New York, "You should not only be librarians but bookmen.... Make it evident that your interest is in books themselves as well as procedures for making them available, that you are bookmen first, and administrators, technicians, and efficiency experts second."

Mr. Ray argued that "a compelling case can still be made for the book as the best source of information. Once one goes beyond the broad, elementary view of a subject, the opportunities which books afford for review and comparison, for immediate reference and prolonged attention to any step in the argument, and for all the other detailed operations that are a necessary part of close study, surely outweigh the advantages that electronic devices can offer." He also pointed out that in a world "conditioned to irrationality, books offer a way of staying human."

The librarians of ancient Alexandria must have said as much to the soldiers of Islam who put the torch to the recorded truth, wisdom and beauty of classical Greece. <u>But</u>--all such arguments are rather less than half right! The book is merely a lifeless artifact until someone knows enough about it to put it to some significant use, and it is the quality of that use that confers value on the book. Books <u>do</u> offer a way of staying human. So do tapes and records and films; so did the bards who sat by ancient campfires, thumping drums as they

sang of gods and heroes. We stay human as we grow more humane, using language, recorded or remembered, to bring minded order out of the chaos of experience.

Book or tape or scroll or film; printed circuit or thermoplastic memory module: it's what we put into them that counts; it's the way we take out of them what others put into them that makes civilizations live and grow healthier and more fair. It is what we do with information that helps us to become wise and generous. It is the way we, the people of the book, exercise our vocation, serving all the muses, that will determine the quality of tomorrow's life.

That vocation needs constant celebration, no matter how imperfect its exercise. It is thrilling and terrifying to cite the titles of books that changed our minds or reshaped our worlds--there have been many of them. It is comforting to count off the authors, poets, philosophers, dreamers, knaves and fools who help us to tolerate what is inexact and arbitrary about existence. But individual titles, no matter how noble, how powerful, how filled with wisdom or terror, cannot adequately display the resources of the book. It is only as they are ordered and collected into libraries that their essential qualities can be comprehended and employed. Within libraries books become modules, integrated circuits, elements within a sentient network beside which any computer-based technology is merely an adjunct to our informed and educated intelligence. It is necessary, therefore, in dealing with the uses of the book, to consider libraries.

The library is more than a building, a staff, a collection of collections. It is more than methods and procedures, more than budgest and boards. But, what that more is defies language and rhetoric. Perhaps one can get near its meaning by way of metaphor.

In one sense, the library, writ large, is the mind of society. It is where all human experiences are recorded, assessed, translated, and treasured. It is the only effective repository of whatever is meant by the phrase "racial memory". Out of its resources, collective and individual thinking are tested, reinforced,

and amplified. We read out the record; we asses the feedback; we use both as navigational aids on our mind voyages of intellectual and emotional discovery.

"Mind" is a slippery term that will not compute. Like "soul" and "psyche," it is more appropriate to the confessional or to the analyst's session. But only "mind" can handle--can tolerate--the irrational, the disorderly, the chaotic, the capricious, the tragic, and the generous in human affairs. Only a mind can "read out" the meaning in Pat Moynihan's observation on the death of President Kennedy: "You have to be an Irishman to know that sooner or later the world is going to break your heart."

Considered in this sense, the library as a particular building staffed with professionals and stocked with books, tapes, films.....and clay tablets (the Philadelphia Free Library still circulates them!)--the library can and should determine the shape of its community and the quality of its life.

Librarians as well as teachers must know that theirs is a dangerous profession. Libraries, even more than schools, have in the past been attacked as seedbeds of social trouble, even sedition. One has but to read Richard Altick's marvelous book THE COMMON ENGLISH READER to recall how some sections pf the English public regarded the emergence of the free library.

In the mid-19th century even its supporters looked upon the free library mainly as a form of riot control, or at best a means by which to solve the problem of alcoholism among the masses. Free libraries would be, as one proponent put it, "temples erected by Literature for the votaries of Bacchus."

The opponents of the free library used stronger language. They condemned the institution as a kind of "socialists' continuation school," a place where the town loafer could amuse himself at public expense. Some of these 19th century bibliophobes sound like people who today are trying to cadge votes in California. Listen: "By providing public this and public that for the

lower classes, you spoil and pauperize them. The best help is self-help. A man who drinks at the public pump, washes at a public bath, sots at a public house, and dreams away his days with a popular novel borrowed from a public library is not likely to be of much use to the State.....We are as a people getting far too much in the 'public line'." (Altick, 234-235)

We in the United States have a more generous tradition toward the care and nurture of the public library. But the War on Poverty and the associated struggle to build the Great Society have not enlisted the public library in any socially significant way. Some of us may be happy with this omission. Reflect upon it for a moment. We should be outraged.

Read in the September, 1966 issue of THE PROGRESSIVE magazine the article by Jim Fuerset and John S. Wiggins on "Libraries in Trouble", and know that others are reading that "In fourteen of our largest cities, combined, 20 per cent fewer books are now circulated by public libraries than were lent to borrowers thirty to thirty-five years ago...."

Don't settle for cheap explanations about population shifts, the omnipresence of television, the incursions of the paperbacked book, and the changing shape of leisure. Ask why some library administrators "tend to be passive not only about attracting readers but toward local legislators and budget-makers". Ask why librarians are harder to come by today, why the profession does not appear to be an exciting option for our youth.

I am not competent to catalogue the ills of the public library, but as an unabashed bookman, I know what thrills me about the programs in Cleveland and in Pittsburgh and New York.

Take Cleveland as a case in point: The Cleveland library system is "reader-oriented". It constantly seeks to reach new people. It dispenses folders, and posters to churches, stores, social agencies, anywhere people come

together. It considers itself not just a book dispenser but a community center focused upon learning, broadly conceived.....and it does not worry too much about hurt books and scarred furniture. Cleveland's branch libraries are community culture centers....not merely places where genteel book review talks are given on rainy afternoons, but exciting and vital places where the voter registration drives are located, where issues of housing are not only discussed, but where plans for improvement are worked up--and possibly even implemented.

In the worst of the slums there is a branch that is not even called a library. It is known as the "Treasure House for Children". There the chief librarian, miracle of miracles, is the children's librarian. Everything about the place is there for the child. The furniture, the decoration, the reading materials--are all aimed at the child who is culturally deprived. Oh, yes, there are tunnels and other secret passages, there are--save the bookmark--amusement devices, game areas--everything designed (plotted is a better word) to seduce the children into the building and make them feel comfortable in the exciting surrounding where books are transformed into the reward at the end of the rainbow. And, yes, as I am sure you know, Cleveland leads all big cities in the number of books borrowed not only by children but by adults.

This is not to suggest that the uplifting of the poor should be the library's only concern. Yet ours is the first society in human history in which the poor are a helpless minority. Therefore, one must measure the efficacy of our enterprises by our capacity to make a healthy difference in the lives of the least advantaged of our citizens. At the same time the library, functioning as the "mind of society", must be able to understand and act upon all of the reports of its social senses.

The world at large is undergoing great and fundamental changes. We use

the word "explosion" to characterize many of them even when we really mean "crisis": the crisis in values, the rising tide of expectations, the population explosion, the cultural explosion. There is even an urban implosion and something that only the French can describe adequately as "l'explosion scholaire."

It is the sense of the horizon that thrills us; it is the explosions, the crises, the changes in our world that define our goals. And to achieve those goals we must gladly use whatever is at hand. The bound book is a marvelous instrument. It is sometimes even a work of art. There is exquisite pleasure in beautiful type assembled gracefully on a well-proportioned page of hand-laid paper. There is more than an antiquarian's joy in holding a volume of incunabula.

I have paid my homage to the book and I think that I can be at least as eloquent as Gordon Ray in the celebration. I love the feel of leather and the smell of old paper. I carry some book with me wherever I go. I have a personal working library of some four thousand volumes. I have a duly issued public library card and membership in two old private subscription libraries. I buy sixty books a year and read twice that number.

But .... if someone produces an instrument the size of my thumb that will project any portion of the contents of an encyclopedia on any surface as I need it, I want the gadget. If there is a service available through the telephone company which will let me use my television screen as the read-out component for any archive anywhere in the country, I want that service. If books become micro-capsules the size of a dime which can be played through a projector-receiver which will allow me to add margin notes as I now do with a pencil, I want that too.

The shape of the book, which I treasure, is merely a function of the container that it is. The poets of Sumer may have resisted the innovation of the scroll, just as Politian resisted the plague of movable type. They all bowed to the new technology. It is the message that counts, and not the carrier. It is the

idea that is important, and not merely the way you get it. It is a human mind communicating with other human minds past, present, and future that is the book-in-use.

One need not be oblique. We are talking about books and their technology; about tapes and computers, about thermo-plastics and micro-films, about instant read-out and print-out from nation-wide coordinated data banks and all the dreams of terror and hope that the word technology carries in its syllables.

There are many libraries, both public and private, where I can go with a slip of paper and order photo copies of however many pages of books and periodicals I need for whatever work I am about. There are others that will respond to a phone call and send me by messenger a micro-film of a dissertation or a scholarly paper of ancient vintage. Ten years ago I produced an anthology of short stories and had to destroy twenty books to paste up the pages for the printer. Today one typewritten order sheet will get me the same number of pages without hurting a single volume. This service permits my mind to work the scholarly lode and produce part of the next generation of books.

The library is the mind of society. Computer technology, cybernation, information theory, communication theory; all work to convert the metaphor into a definition. New equipment, new materials, new procedures will simplify some aspects of the library's task as they extend the range of its responsibilities.

So, let us consider the future. There will always be books, even as we have known them for five hundred years, but I am certain that there will come a time when some future librarian will display them as curiosities to be circulated, as clay tablets are today. There will be libraries and archives as identifiable as such, but different in ways we are already comfortable with, and

filled with the great writers, the small songs, of the human record.

The foregoing discussion has laid heavy stress on the structure and function of the library, and this, I believe, is the most appropriate way to respond to the question posed. For it is when books are assembled into libraries, whether to serve an individual, a classroom, or a nation, that the efficacies of the book for its infinite purposes are most clearly displayed.

I must also repeat my comments about the book and technology. I am not concerned with the binding or the typography, although both may enchant me. I am not concerned with its manufacture, nor even with its physical shape. As I suggested before, given our ever-increasing technological sophistication, it is probable that books in some near future will bear less physical resemblance to papyri. The book of the future will probably be as different from present cloth or paper-bound volumes as the contemporary book differs from papyri or cuneiform tablets. What makes the book what it is will remain constant in every future age: the physical result of a mind or minds attempting with varying degrees of success to make contact with and inform other minds in future times. After all--this is one of the cardinal purposes of education, which is what every book, however made or used, is always employed towards.